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SUBJECT: SRSG LEGWAILA DOWNPLAYS GSE DETENTION OF UNMEE
LOCAL STAFF

REF: ASMARA 173

Classified By: Amb. Scott H. DeLisi. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) SRSG Legwaila and UNMEE staff members provided an update on detained staff on February 15. They report that 22 staff members (of a total local staff of approximately 200) had been detained but that 11 of those have already been released. Status of another 17 staff members continue to be in "unknown." Legwaila said that given past experience he believed it most likely that those 17 were in hiding but had not contacted UNMEE in the way that 4 other staff members had before they too disappeared from sight. As reported reftel, it appears as though the staff members being held are most likely detained for failure to perform national service but the GSE has declined to offer UNMEE any details on the detentions.

¶2. (C) Legwaila, in briefing Ambassador and selected European Heads of Mission, emphasized that he had told DPKO officials in New York that these developments were "nothing new." He noted that one day last year the GSE had detained 68 UNMEE staff and that these problems are a routine part of UNMEE's long-standing tensions with the GSE. Legwaila did not believe the detentions were related to other GSE restrictions on UNMEE flight operations or on the composition of UNMEE's non-Eritrean staff. He appeared bemused by the intensity of the reaction in New York and surprised that DPKO chief Guehenno had brought the matter to the attention of the Security Council. Legwaila noted that DPKO had never paid any particular attention in the past to GSE detentions of local staff and, while acknowledging the heightened tensions which have focused more attention on the UNMEE-GSE relationship, he suggested that he nonetheless still thought DPKO was over-reacting to the current problem.

¶3. (C) Legwaila went on to recount in some detail the challenges that UNMEE has had in dealing with the GSE on local staff issues since UNMEE's inception. Issues related to providing the GSE lists of UNMEE staffers, copies of their identification (UNMEE and national identity cards), etc. have been constant sources of irritation leading to more

confrontations for UNMEE than for bilateral diplomatic missions. Legwaila commented that the GSE had long believed that UNMEE employment was a refuge of Eritrean malcontents and thus scrutinized the staff more closely. At the same time, however, he also observed that he believed the GSE did not want UNMEE to leave or even to reduce its staffing - possibilities offered by the Secretary General in response to the GSE's challenges to UNMEE and the UN. The problem, however, was that at the same time the GSE was not prepared to take the steps to "treat UNMEE right."

14. (C) Comment: Post concurs with Legwaila's assessment that the staff detentions reflect long-standing headaches in the GSE-UNMEE relationship rather than a deliberate escalation of tensions by the GSE. However, even if Legwaila is correct in believing that the GSE would prefer UNMEE to stay, and we think he is, we should not assume that this will lead the GSE to either ease restrictions on UNMEE or to "treat UNMEE right" in the future. These day-to-day problems will remain part of the relationship so long as UNMEE remains in Eritrea. And, no matter which option the Security Council chooses when it ultimately addresses the issue of UNMEE's future, we have no reason to think that the GSE may consider easing the restrictions that keep UNMEE from performing effectively or efficiently. End Comment.

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